

Discuss differences and similarities between decolonial and postcolonial approaches to knowledge production.

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1 Introduction

This essay will briefly sketch out the origins and main features of the postcolonial episteme, followed by its evolution into decolonial thinking. Finally, the essay will discuss the implications for academic practice.

2 The postcolonial approach

Postcolonial theory can be drawn back to the adoption of a cultural front by national liberation movements in the Third World in order to 'develop anti-colonial consciousness.'(Young 2001, p. 7) This first cultural turn emerges in the 1960s and takes many forms, such as Black Power in the USA, the direct action campaigns of the Welsh Language Society, or the Cultural Revolution in China.

Specifically in France, the cultural turn was associated with the liberation of Algeria. The PCF had taken an ambivalent line on Algerian independence,(ibid., p. 419-420) and this forced French schol-

ars of the New Left to look outside for a form of Marxism-Leninism adapted to the national liberation movements in the Third World.¹ As a result, the development of post-structuralism within the Francophone academe coincided with attempts to understand structures of colonial power.(Young 2001, p. 470) While postcolonialism pushes past the class boundaries of Marxism, it nonetheless comes from a tradition of fundamental contention with capitalism-imperialism. For example, Fanon (1965) grounds his rhetoric in the revolutionary subjectivity of the oppressed masses, and he remains wary of the national or patriotic bourgeoisie.(Hiddleston 2009, pp. 38-39) Again, just as postcolonial thought goes beyond class, the recognition of a proletarian element nevertheless ascribes it a class dimension.

Another feature of the cultural emphasis is that postcolonial theory pays special attention to power relations, and in particular the continuity between *dominance* and *hegemony*.(Ali 2015, pp. 242-245; Chibber 2013, p. 35) Through this continuity, we see that colonial power extends beyond the coercive institutions of colonial domination, and establishes hegemony by seeping into everyday social interactions. This critical engagement with power suggests that a successful anti-colonial project ought not only to expel the (foreign) colonial force, but also prevent the re-emergence of neo-colonial patterns within the liberated society.(Bragança and Wallerstein 1982, pp. 4-5) As such the liberation struggle needs to win cultural acceptance and consent, and it shows how the contest over hegemony is two-sided. Hegemony is just as important to the national liberation movement as it is to the colonial occupier.(Ali 2015, p. 256)

The last feature of postcolonialism is its relationship with real political movements for national liberation. Postcolonial thinkers are close to these movements, and sometimes intervene directly in them. For Régis Debray it was the ELN in Bolivia, for Edward Said

¹See Chris Marker's 1977 film essay *le fond de l'air est rouge* for an account of the the New Left and the "Third World war."

(2003) it was Palestine,² for EMS Namboodiripad (2010, p. 8) it was the Indian National Congress, and for Fanon it was the Algerian FLN. These are all tied to the process of national construction and more broadly the formation of an anti-imperialist global order.

3 The decolonial approach

By contrast, the decolonial approach is critical of ‘Third World fundamentalisms’(Grosfoguel 2007, p. 212) and addresses the universal, totalising narratives present in the postcolonial. Part of the decolonial approach involves divorcing postcolonialism from its pretence to modernity, and from its association with alternative nationalisms. For example, the decolonial approach takes up the concept of the multitude from Hardt and Negri (2005) – and rejects the unity of the colonised public.(Ciccariello-Maher 2017, pp. 123-125) The singular concepts of people, nation, race, class, gender, are broken down and their heterogeneous dynamics exposed to criticism.

Part of the decolonial approach rests on a relationship between colonialism and modernity.(Mignolo 2013, p. 306) If modernity or historicism is a feature of colonialism, this explains the decolonial insistence on a post-modern departure from modernist or historically-linear postcolonial attitudes.

Another decolonial position exposes the “Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism”(Stojnić 2017, p. 109; Grosfoguel 2007, p. 211) This is not only because European or Western thinkers are privileged points of reference for postcolonial theory, it also touches on the way in which we talk and think about coloniality. For example, Césaire (2001, p. 35-36) described colonial violence as savagery, characterising the coloniser as uncivilised. The image of the ‘European savage’ is deliberately provocative. It plays on the language of coloniality, and requires the reader to confront the way in which

²Said participated in the Palestinian National Council in a symbolic capacity, but he never actually joined the PLO, see *The Politics Of Dispossession* (1995).

discourse reproduces power relations. The decolonial approach is careful not to fall into the trap of critiquing Eurocentrism within a normatively Eurocentric discursive framework.

Gurminder Bhambra (2014, p. 115) draws distinctions between postcolonial and decolonial schools based on their regional origins. Postcolonial ideas generally originate in the Middle East and South Asia, meanwhile decolonial ideas come from South America. In terms of their academic organisation, decolonialism and postcolonialism each refer to the Latin American and South Asian Subaltern Studies Groups respectively. However, these distinctions are permeable, and even the terms postcolonial and decolonial are used synonymously. They are also both expressed as primarily cultural critiques.

4 Conclusion - consequences for knowledge production

The definition of Eurocentrism given by Samir Amin (1989, pp. 107-108) is to dismiss non-European knowledges as imperfect, and suggest that there is not much to be learned from them. Therefore a decolonial approach requires an 'epistemic shift,' (Mignolo 2013, p. 307) to seek other knowledges. This involves going beyond the familiar points of reference in Engels, Lenin, or Luxemburg, and instead looking to the theory produced in the Third World. In keeping with decolonial suspicion of universalism, the popular movements outside the metropole produce their own theory, adapted to unique social and political conditions. We should reject the attitude that serious theory is written in Europe, while the rest of the world produces 'guerrilla manuals.' (Butler 2018) A decolonial academy needs wider points of reference, and these should be upheld as valid, and valuable contributions.

Stemming from this, research *about* subaltern populations should

come *from* the subaltern. Decolonial work aims to give the subaltern a voice, and involves the use of participatory methods; all the while remaining vigilant and reflexive of power relations between research and its subjects.(Schurr and Segebart 2012, pp. 149-150) Otherwise put, the task of the critical intellectual is to work alongside the people, and resist the coloniality or 'embourgeoisement' of the academy.(Prashad 2018, p. 61)

Decolonial and postcolonial ideas are diverse, they touch on literary and cultural criticisms which this essay has not substantively engaged with. In particular, it was difficult to include Gayatri Spivak in this overview. A longer essay would also give more weight to postcolonial/decolonial research methods and methodology.

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